

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

1/29/06

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1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (NRSV)

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. [2] Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; [3] but anyone who loves God is known by him.

[4] Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." [5] Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth--as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- [6] yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

[7] It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. [8] "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. [9] But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. [10] For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? [11] So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. [12] But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. [13] Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

THE LIMITS OF LOVE

November 22, 1975. That was the day that I was married, the day I made a commitment to love one woman.

This past November we celebrated 30 years together with a cruise to the Bahamas. They made a big deal of it at the dinner table one night, and one of

the young men at our table, a musician who was about to be married for the fourth time said, “Thirty years, that’s a life sentence.”

Actually, I think that it’s more of a comfort than a life sentence.

Love means agreeing to live with certain restrictions. In the case of marriage we say something like, “I promise to be your loving and *faithful* husband (or wife).” We restrict our choices when it comes to other men and women. We agree not to do certain things out of love, and we agree to sacrifice for the good of another person.

I always read a selection from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians at the weddings I do because it brings out this idea of the self-imposed restrictions of love. Paul said,

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant [5] or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; [6] it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. [7] It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”
(1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Love at its heart is about voluntarily restricting our choices, not always saying what we feel, not always insisting on our own way, and not always having the last word.

When Paul wrote this famous passage on love, he was not thinking about romantic love.

Paul was talking about the kind of love that should characterize the Christian Church.

A CHURCH IN LOVE WITH ITSELF

Unfortunately, the church at Corinth was not a good example of self giving, sacrificial love. In fact, they were quite the opposite. Many of them insisted on having their own way and the last word on any subject.

They thought that they were the elite of the Christian world. They considered themselves to be “advanced” Christians who had more knowledge than the average person.

The entire first letter to the Corinthians is Paul’s attempt to knock these proud people off of their high horse. As we mentioned last week, Paul reminded them that before their call to be Disciples of Christ not many of them were wise or of noble birth.

God didn’t call them because they knew it all. God called them because they were foolish. God didn’t call them because they were strong. God called them because they were weak. (I Corinthians 1:27)

God has always had a sense of humor when it comes to church leadership! And God wants us to know that when comes to the Christian life, it’s not about us and our abilities. It’s about God and God’s saving grace.

Many of the problems in the church today begin when someone insists that they have more knowledge than someone else.

Now don’t misunderstand.

This doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t debate about what it means to be a disciple of Christ; this doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t confront immorality or injustice.

This doesn’t mean that we should leave the hard issues for someone else to decide. If we can’t talk about the big issues of life in the church, then where can we discuss them?

On the other hand, we should always approach any debate with a healthy respect for our own weaknesses and our own lack of understanding.

More than that, we also need to remember that we can win the argument and lose the relationship, and the Bible tells us that the relationship is always more important than the argument.

Paul said in this same letter to the Corinthians that we are the “body of Christ” and each one of us is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:28) In the church we are all needed, but none of us are self-sufficient.

KNOWLEDGE PUFFS UP

We especially need to remember this when we have debates in the church over controversial issues. Knowledge is often used as a club to beat others over the head with their inadequacies. When we use knowledge in that way, we alienate people.

More than that, we can actually do harm to the kingdom of God. That’s what Paul is talking about in our lesson for today. He said, “Knowledge puffs up.”

Isn’t that a wonderful phrase? I imagine one of those fish that blows up and expands in order to appear more ferocious when confronted with predators. Out of fear and a desire for self-preservation the fish inflates itself.

And I’ve found many people do the same thing when it comes to knowledge. They quote Scripture endlessly or drone on about their accomplishments. They insist on doing things their way and putting others down when they disagree.

They may be right or they may be wrong, but one thing is always true. No one wants to be around them. They cause conflict wherever they go, and they tear down the church.

It breaks my heart when people leave the church because someone thoughtlessly insisted on “speaking their mind” with no regard for anyone’s feelings. Is any argument so important that we can justify driving people away from the arms of Christ?

LOVE BUILDS UP

Paul had this to say to those of us who are so proud of what we know,

“You need to deflate that ego. You need to burst that bubble of pride. Instead of puffing yourself up by showing off your knowledge, you need to build up the church by showing love toward others. Out of love you need to put some restrictions of what you say and do.”

Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up.

Paul goes a step further with his argument. He says,

“In fact, the person who feels like it’s necessary to show off how much he or she knows really doesn’t know anything ... at least anything important from God’s perspective.

God is love, and a true knowledge of God begins when we sacrificially love another person.”

MEAT OFFERED TO IDOLS

The specific problem that Paul confronts in our lesson is no longer a problem today. It was a problem unique to the ancient world; it was the problem of meat offered to idols.

You need to understand that the ancient Greek world was a place filled with statues to various gods. There was a god for everything. And just in case a

god might be left out and become angry, the Greeks even had an altar dedicated to the “unknown god.” (Acts 17:23)

Animal sacrifices to these various gods were big business, and the meat offered to these idols was often sold in the public markets. If you were a part of a trade group or went to party, there would probably be a meal held in a temple to one of these gods, and they would serve meat that had been offered to these idols.

And so the question arose,

“Can I participate in this society in which I live or do I have to stay home?

Can I eat the meat that is available at the public markets or do I have to become a vegetarian?”

There were some in the church at Corinth who had no doubts about this question. They considered themselves to be “advanced” theologians. In their great “knowledge” they reasoned,

“There’s only one true God. These idols are mere figments of someone’s imagination.

It doesn’t make any difference if we eat meat that has been offered to idols because these idols are nothing.

We have the freedom to do whatever we want to do.

Bring on the steak!”

CONCERN FOR THE WEAKER MEMBERS

Paul is willing to admit that these “in the know” Christians had a point. It’s true that the idols are nothing. There’s only one real God who created

everything. Eating meat offered to these false idols wouldn't harm them in any way.

But, Paul went on to say that these "bright" Christians do not have the right to just do whatever they want when it comes to meat offered to idols.

It's not just about knowledge; it's also about love. It wasn't just about them and what they thought was right. They had an obligation to consider how their actions might affect others in the church.

There were other Christians in the Corinthian Church who struggled mightily with this issue of meat offered to idols. They came from a pagan background. At one time they made sacrifices to these idols; they believed in them at one time. And they had a hard time getting away from that lifestyle.

These former pagans could not blithely rid themselves of years of training and superstition. They were weak. They could be tempted to once again participate in a lifestyle that would lead them down the road to ruin.

That can be true for many in the Christian church today. The issues have changed but the temptation remains the same. Many of us have some "demon" that may have plagued us in the past and is still is a potential problem in the future.

For some that demon's name is alcohol. For others the demon is emotional instability. The list goes on and on.

All of us are weak in one way or another. And we all need the help and support of the Christian community in overcoming our weakness.

Paul tells us that the most important thing we can do is to consider the conscience of the "weaker" brother or sister. We do not live in isolation as Disciples of Christ. It's not just about us and our freedom. We are called to live in community, and that means regulating our actions by the rule of love.

What can we do to build up those Christians who are weaker? What should we give up in order to build up the life of someone else? How might we restrict our freedom out of love for our brother or sister in Christ? How can we accept others whose experiences and outlook on life are quite different from ours?

Christian love specializes in welcoming and building up those who struggle and are different.

According to Paul, the love of God in Christ creates a community that welcomes Jews and Greeks, men and women, slaves and free. (Galatians 3:28) Those were the major divisions in the ancient world.

And the love of God in Christ brought all of them together.

What divisions exist in our world? In many ways our society is more polarized than ever before. But, in the church we are called as an act of faith to overcome those differences and lift one another up as we struggle with our weaknesses.

God in Christ is calling us to come together out of love. Love keeps us from tearing each other apart over our differences. Love is the glue that holds us together. Love means that we make compromises for the sake of the community of faith.

These are the limitations imposed by love.

THE CROQUET GAME

There were once some missionaries who set up a croquet game in their front yard. Several of their “primitive” neighbors became interested and wanted to join the fun. The missionaries explained the game and started them out, each with a mallet and a ball.

As the game progressed, opportunity came for one of the players to take advantage of another by knocking that person's ball out of the court. A missionary explained the procedure, but his advice only puzzled his native friend.

"Why would I want to knock his ball out of the court?" he asked. "So you will be the one to win!" a missionary said.

The short man, clad only in a loin cloth, shook his head in bewilderment. His "civilized" neighbor was suggesting something absurdly uncivil. Competition is generally ruled out in a hunting gathering society, where people survive, not by competing with one another, but by working together.

The game continued, but nobody followed the missionaries' advice. When a player successfully got through all the wickets, the game was not over for him. He went back and gave aid and advice to his fellows.

As the final player moved toward the last wicket, the affair was still very much a team effort. And finally, when the last wicket was played, the "team" shouted happily, "We won!" "We won!"

PLAYING A DIFFERENT GAME

I think that Paul would have loved this story. Sometimes you have to ask yourself who is really "primitive" and who is really "advanced."

In our modern, competitive world we use our knowledge to gain an advantage over others, but suppose we used our knowledge to lift up the weakest members of our society?

Suppose we changed the rules of the game and declared that we win when the weakest player rolls his ball through the final wicket?

That's the game we play when we become Disciples of Christ. Out of love we put restrictions on our competitive instincts. Out of love we strive to bring the weakest member along with us on the journey.

Indeed, the test of the Christian community is the extent to which we care for and support the weakest among us. In building up and caring for the weak we actually experience the presence of Christ.

(Matthew 25:40)

I guess the question we must ask ourselves today is this: Are we willing to play a different game? Are we willing to live by a different set of rules? Are we willing to let love be a trump card that overcomes every barrier? Are we really willing to be our brother and sister's keeper?

This is certainly a foreign way of thinking in our world. We seldom ask the question about our brother or sister. All of our judgments are made on the basis of our individual rights and freedoms.

You do what you want to do, and I'll do what I want to do. We'll all do "our own thing." Freedom means standing on your own two feet and not caring about what the other person thinks. Right? Wrong.

Freedom, Christian freedom means having the courage to stoop down and lift up the brother or sister in need. Christian freedom means not lowering the boom on somebody when they make a silly statement. Sometimes not saying something is the best that we can do.

THE VERBATIM

When I took my first course in pastoral care, I made visits in the hospital under the supervision of a chaplain.

After our visits we would write down what was said in that visit (a paper that we called a verbatim). We would read these "verbatim" and the group would critique our care. As you might imagine, we dreaded these sessions.

In one hospital visit that I wrote about a person made some theological comments. I thought that these comments were rather questionable. Fortunately, I was an expert in theology or at least I had recently taken a course in theology! So I proceeded to help them correct their faulty beliefs.

The chaplain took a long, deep breath and said,

“I’m sure your theology professor would have been proud of your effort. But, I, as your pastoral care professor think that you were a bit too quick to offer answers.

Sometimes people use theological language and talk about God but what they really want to know is something more personal. They want to know this: Do you love me? Do you care about me? And how we answer those questions will tell them a lot more about the God we worship than our words.”

That statement has been helpful for me down through the years. As a pastor I hear an awful lot of bad theology, and I want to jump right in and tell people, “That’s wrong. You need to believe this instead.”

But, I remember that it’s not always all about the theology. It’s about love.

It’s about taking that brother or sister in my arms in the name of Christ and waiting for the right moment. It’s about holding my tongue at times in order for the other person to feel understood and accepted.

It’s about being strong enough in my faith to trust God to work in the heart and minds of people and not always filling the air with the sound of my own voice.

And so I leave you with the words of Paul, words that all of us need to remember and live by.

“Knowledge puffs up.

Love builds up.”

Let’s take the more excellent way.

Let’s take the way of love.

Let us build up the body of Christ with acts of sacrificial love.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN